

# Spartan militarism – a modern mirage?

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What images spring to mind when you think of the Spartans? For most readers, I bet, the main images will be connected to the military and war: the fight to death at the battle of Thermopylae; the tough upbringing of Spartan boys; the Spartan mother ordering her departing warrior son to return 'either with this [shield] or on it'. Or images linked to the adjectives 'Spartan' and 'laconic', symbolizing an austere, barrack-like lifestyle and the minimalist style of speech of the soldier-type whose actions speak louder than words.

These military images are the dominant ones presented in TV documentaries, like the four-hour epic *The rise and fall of the Spartans* broadcast on the History Channel in 2002. The programme's opening words set the tone (to the backdrop of warriors advancing into battle and young boys wrestling):

*In their time they commanded great respect, but also inspired great fear. They were ancient warriors who perfected their art by building a society dedicated to war, and in doing so created a lifestyle and aesthetic that to this day bears their name. They were the Spartans, and this is their story...*

Contrary to those final words, however, this militaristic image of the Spartans is not just *their* story. It is equally *our* story: a current example of the way in which features of classical Spartan society have been exaggerated, distorted, and even invented in later ages for contemporary social or political purposes. This phenomenon is widely known as 'the Spartan mirage', after the 1933 book *Le mirage spartiate* by the French classicist François Ollier. Its long and varied history from ancient Greece to mid-20th-century Britain was surveyed in 1969 in Elizabeth Rawson's book, *The Spartan tradition in European thought*.

The militaristic aspect of 'the Spartan mirage', however, has received little attention: there is no entry for 'militarism' in the index to Rawson's book. Indeed, the idea of Sparta as a militaristic state is so deeply ingrained in recent thought that its role in the mirage is often overlooked. Yet few ideas relating to the ancient world have been so heavily exploited in 20th-century politics.

## Sparta and Germany

Sparta's militaristic image is actually a relatively late development in modern thought. Before the mid-19th century most European thinkers viewed Sparta's military characteristics as a means to higher civic goals such as her political stability and social harmony. We can see this clearly in contemporary versions of the Spartans' self-sacrifice at the battle of Thermopylae, as in the famous lines of Lord Byron's 'The Isles of Greece', written in 1821 on the eve of the Greek War of Independence:

*Earth! Render back from out thy breast  
A remnant of our Spartan dead!  
Of the three hundred give but three  
To make a new Thermopylae!*

Byron's focus is less on the Spartans' martial prowess than on how the revival of their actions at Thermopylae could lead to Greece's moral and political rejuvenation.

It was only after Athens overtook Sparta as the model Greek state that Sparta's militarism came to be highlighted as her primary characteristic. During the later 19th century the idea became well established in European thought, mostly as a negative contrast to Athens' commercial and artistic nature. In Germany, however, one strong strand of thought identified the Spartans, as military conquerors and leaders of the Dorian race, with the modern Aryan or Nordic race, represented above all by Imperial Germany. In the early 20th century this identification was intensified after the country's military defeat in World War I and demands by the German Right for a return to former imperial virtues.

In the 1930s the Nazis developed this militarist self-identification to its fullest extent. Take, for example, their manipulation of the epitaph upon the tomb of the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae recorded by Herodotus:

*O stranger, go tell the Spartans that here obedient to their commands we lie.*

This epitaph was already famous in Germany: during World War I it was used to commemorate thousands of poorly-equipped German soldiers who were sent needlessly to their deaths in 1914 at Langemarck in Flanders. But in 1944 in the final days of the battle of Stalingrad, it was re-worked by Nazi Minister Hermann Göring, who urged the doomed German soldiers to emulate the 300. Göring's version, however, gave the original a new militaristic twist:

*When you come to Germany, report that you have seen us fighting at Stalingrad, as the law of honour and warfare has commanded Germany.*

The soldiers are now not lying in death but fighting, and their obedience is no longer to the civic authorities but to the law of honour and warfare.

The Nazis' preoccupation with the Spartans' martial spirit was spread by German academics to a wider audience. In 1940 a group of classical scholars produced a textbook for use in Adolf-Hitler schools whose very title, *Sparta: the life-struggle of a Nordic master race*, evoked the image of a militaristic conquering state.

The Nazis' self-identification with Sparta reinforced an unquestioned image of Spartan militarism in British academic and political circles. In 1941, for example, eminent classicist Gilbert Murray, in a lecture to the Royal Society of Arts, drew a direct parallel between Athens' war against Sparta and Britain's wars with Germany. His emphasis was very much on the enemy's stark efficiency in war. Similar images have dominated the writings of British ancient historians since World War II.

## The United States and Soviet Russia

During the 1980s the image of Spartan militarism underwent a new era of exploitation in the arena of international politics: within the world of U.S. defence analysis under the Presidency of Ronald Reagan, this time in association with another totalitarian state: Soviet Russia. The catalyst was a most unlikely

setting: a RAND Corporation conference in 1984 in Washington D.C. on 'Models of the Soviet Economy'. The key point of discussion was dissatisfaction at the limitations of existing models in predicting the development of the Soviet economy. For the Reagan administration this was a serious issue. On 8 June 1982 Reagan had made the first of his infamous 'evil empire' speeches, to the British Parliament, proclaiming his belief in the downfall of the Soviet system. For Reagan's policy, the inability of U.S. analysts to predict Soviet economic development was a major liability.

At the conference several participants argued that the problem with existing models was their reliance on Western market economics. The most fundamental critique came from Henry S. Rowen, a high-level academic, Chair of the National Intelligence Council and soon to be Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. He pin-pointed the nature of the problem by drawing on Sparta:

*The trick is how to model such a system. Let me suggest a simpler society as an example. Suppose we were modelling Sparta. What might be the parameters of interest? We would probably pay a lot of attention to the training and inculcation of youths in the martial arts. Another would be the health of the agricultural-warrior class. We would want the model to include the sword and spear industry.*

'The Soviet Union', he concluded, 'can be regarded as a kind of Sparta writ large.'

Rowen's speech was followed by further analogies between Sparta and Soviet Russia. In public testimony before the Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress, Robert M. Gates, Deputy Director of the CIA from 1986 to 1989, asserted that, 'the Soviet Union is much like Sparta. Virtually the entire economy and society is organized in a way in which the military and its needs receive first priority'.

This was not the end of the Sparta-Soviet affair. With high-level backers like Gates and Rowen, the Office of the Secretary of Defense went on to sponsor academic research on their supposed militaristic parallels. The result was a remarkable 44-page pamphlet entitled *Soviet defense spending: the Spartan analogy*, published by the RAND Corporation in October 1989. The author, Alvin Bernstein, was a former professor of ancient history who became Chairman of the Department of Strategy at the Naval War College in the Reagan years. In the same month that his pamphlet appeared, Reagan appointed him Assistant Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Planning.

Bernstein's pamphlet attempted to give academic backing to the idea that there were genuine parallels between what he called the 'militaristic states' of Sparta and the Soviet Union. By the time of the pamphlet's publication, Reagan's apparently wild prediction was beginning to come true. The Soviet Eastern bloc was in process of disintegration, followed in 1991 by the break-up of the Soviet Union itself. In 1997 Bernstein published a subsequent article, retrospectively extending his earlier argument by viewing this double disintegration in parallel terms to the break-up of Sparta's classical empire.

### **Sparta today**

Today we might think that the end of the Nazi and Soviet regimes has undermined the potential for future associations between Sparta and modern militarism. Not so. In March 2004, a trailer for a U.S. National Public Radio programme on *Ancient Sparta and the U.S. war against terrorism* advertised a discussion of the parallels 'between ancient Sparta and the current enemies of the United States'. The image of Sparta's militaristic society remains very much our story, a story that will continue to shape perceptions of our post-9/11 world.

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